

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Clostridium difficile

The aim of this leaflet is to provide you and your visitors with information about Clostridium difficile (C. diff). This includes routes of transmission, symptoms, treatment and infection control precautions to help limit the spread of this infection. We will start with a section on infection prevention and control.

What can I do to prevent the spread of C. diff?

- Thorough **hand washing with soap and water and drying** is very important as this helps prevent the germ from spreading.
- Kindly remind our staff if they forget to wash their hands.
- It is advisable to change nightwear and bed linen daily or when soiled.
- Your room will be cleaned daily with a special cleaning solution.

Can I have visitors?

You can have visitors provided they are well enough to visit you. They will be asked to wash their hands with soap and water before and after visiting you. Remind your visitors to wash their hands with soap and water if they forget.

If you are concerned about infecting anyone, please ask your nurse or healthcare professional for advice.

What is C. diff?

C. diff is a bacterium (germ) which lives harmlessly in the gut (intestine) of many people. About 3% of healthy adults and as many as 66% of healthy babies have a number of C. diff living in their gut. The numbers of C. diff which live in the gut of healthy people are kept in check by the normal 'good' bacterial population of the gut. C. diff normally does not cause any problems in healthy individuals.

However, when these 'good' bacteria are killed by antibiotics, C. diff is able to multiply and produce toxins (poisons) which cause diarrhoea. In addition, C. diff produces spores.

What are spores?

C. diff produces spores (an outer coat) when it encounters unfavourable conditions, such as being outside of the body. The spore is very hardy and can survive on clothes and on environmental surfaces for long periods.

How does the balance of the normal bacterial population of my gut alter?

C. diff can cause illness when certain antibiotics have disturbed the balance of the normal bacteria in your gut. This enables C. diff to multiply rapidly and produce toxins (poisons), which are responsible for the diarrhoea and damage to the cells lining your gut.

If you take antibiotics for another infection (for instance a urine infection), as well as killing the bacteria which caused this infection, the antibiotics will also kill many 'good' bacteria which live in your gut. This allows C. diff to multiply as they are not affected by the antibiotics.

How is C. diff diagnosed?

A sample of diarrhoea is tested for the presence of C. diff toxins. The result is usually available within a few hours.

How is C. diff spread?

Patients who have C. diff excrete (pass) large numbers of spores. These may contaminate the area around them including their bed, toilet area and equipment.

When someone comes into contact with the contaminated surfaces, they can easily spread the spores, which can then infect other people by entering the body through their mouth.

How serious is the infection which can develop?

C. diff infection ranges from mild to severe diarrhoea, to more unusually severe inflammation of the bowel.

What are the symptoms of C. diff?

- The main symptom is explosive diarrhoea which has a particularly unpleasant smell.
- Other symptoms include stomach cramps, fever, nausea and loss of appetite.
- Symptoms may last for a few days to several weeks.

What will happen to me if I have C. diff diarrhoea while I am in hospital?

You will be moved to a single room to prevent the spread of infection to other patients. It is important you stay in your room and do not visit other patients/areas until your diarrhoea has stopped for three days. Your nurse will advise you.

What treatment will I need?

You will only need treatment if you have symptoms. Your doctor will assess the treatment options. If certain antibiotics have caused the diarrhoea then you may have to stop taking them. Sometimes stopping the antibiotics is enough. If diarrhoea continues, then a specific antibiotic may be prescribed.

Avoid dehydration

Remember to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration as this can easily occur, especially in very young and elderly people.

How did I get C. diff?

Some people, as mentioned previously, may be healthy carriers of C. diff and the source of their infection will be from C. diff living in their own gut. The number of C. diff can grow if the individual is given antibiotics to treat an infection.

In other cases, environmental spores may be swallowed, and subsequent antibiotic treatment leads to disease.

You are more at risk of developing C. diff infection if you:

- Are taking or have recently finished taking antibiotics.
- Are an older person.

- Have spent a long time in hospital or in another type of healthcare setting such as a care home.
- Have weakened immunity, for example because you are receiving cancer treatment.
- Are being treated by multiple courses of antibiotics.
- Have a serious illness.
- Have had bowel surgery.

How long do I need to stay in hospital?

You should normally wait until your diarrhoea has settled and your doctor is satisfied that you are fit to go home. Your doctor will let you know if you need to continue treatment at home.

How will I know when the C. diff is no longer infectious?

Once the diarrhoea has stopped for at least 72 hours and your bowel motion is back to normal, you are not considered to be infectious.

Can C. diff diarrhoea come back?

Yes. Some people may suffer a relapse of diarrhoea. C. diff bacteria may remain in your gut for some time afterwards and the diarrhoea may return, requiring further treatment.

Please contact your GP if you develop diarrhoea after you have been discharged and let them know you have had C. diff recently. If you require antibiotics for another illness, please let your GP know you have recently had C. diff.

What happens if I need to come back to hospital?

Whenever you need to be admitted to any hospital in the future, it is very important you inform the doctor/nurse that you have previously had C. diff diarrhoea. You must do this before a bed is allocated to you in a ward.

Important to note

Alcohol hand gels are not effective against C. diff spores. It is important that spores are removed from the hands by thoroughly washing with liquid soap and water then thoroughly drying hands using a paper towel. If you are in hospital or in a nursing or care home, do not be afraid to remind staff of this.

Remember, you **MUST** wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating or handling food; this will help prevent germs spreading. Don't forget to ask for help with this if you need it.

Contact details

If you have any further questions or concerns, please talk to one of your nurses or a member of the Infection Prevention and Control Team, available Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm. There is an answer phone outside these hours:

- Telephone: 01623 622515, extension 3525/6268.

Useful websites

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

World Health Organisation: [World Patient Safety Day 2023: Engaging Patients for Patient Safety \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-patient-safety-day-2023)

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net. This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you.

External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. If you require a full list of references for this leaflet, please email sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net or telephone 01623 622515, extension 6927.

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